JUSTICE LEAGUE®

TASK FORCE™

JUSTICE LEAGUE TASK FORCE

23

MAY 95

APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY

TRAGEDY FOR TRIUMPH™

PRIEST
VELLUTO
MCKENNA

VELLUTO
ALBRECHT

Chok II

WHAAAAMMM

SOMETHING'S WRONG.

SOMETHING'S GONE *TERRIBLY* WRONG.

I'M *DYING.*

PRIEST
WRITER
SAL VELLUTO
PENCILLER
STEGBAUER, McKENNA W/GRAY
INKERS
KEVIN CUNNINGHAM
LETTERER
ADRIENNE ROY
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ALISANDE MORALES
ASST. EDITOR
RUBEN DIAZ
EDITOR
BRIAN AUGUSTYN
VANITY CREDIT
~
ADAM BLAUSTEIN
PLOT ASSIST

THAT'S NOT SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN.

THE MARTIAN MANHUNTER WOULDN'T *KILL* ME JUST TO MAKE A *POINT.*

WHAAAAM

WHAAAAM

THAT MEANS SOMETHING'S REAL WRONG.

THIS ROOM... *AIRTIGHT*... LINED WITH *SOLAR ENERGY* CELLS... SOAKING ME FOR MY STORED POWER...

AND I'VE GOTTA STOP BEING A *DOORMAT.*

... CAN'T SHIFT FROM *MATTER* TO *ENERGY* WITHOUT IT... AND AS MATTER, I NEED TO *BREATHE.*

WHAAAAM

WHAAAAM

IT'S TAKEN ME LONG ENOUGH TO REALIZE THIS *GAME*--THIS STUPID *JOKE* TRIUMPH'S PULLING ON J'ONN--

--HAS TURNED *REAL.* I GET MYSELF OUT, OR I'M *DEAD.*

WHAAAAMM

MY GENIUS SOLUTION? USE WHAT LITTLE POWER I HAVE LEFT TO HELP ME BASH THE HELL OUT OF ONE OF THE CELLS...

...GET IT TO *BLEED* JUST A LITTLE ENERGY...

...YEAH...

...MUCH BETTER NOW...

NO SIGN OF COUNT CHOKULA--HE MUST'VE SPLIT... MAYBE GONE TO *PARIS*, WHERE HE WAS TRYING TO BUY *LAND*.

HE MUST'VE *GASSED* ME WHEN I WAS SLEEPING... BACK WHEN I THOUGHT BARON VON MAULER WAS REALLY J'ONN J'ONZZ IN *DISGUISE*.

...Oh, MAN... I ACTUALLY WENT TO *SLEEP* IN THAT HOUSE...

THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A GAME... A *JOKE*... PULLING ONE OVER ON J'ONN WHILE *PROVING* WE WEREN'T *DOPES*.

AND NOW WE'RE LOOKING LIKE *DOPES*.

OF COURSE, IT *WAS* TRIUMPH'S PLAN...

PARIS...

ANY SIGN OF GYPSY, L-RON?

NEGATIVE, TRIUMPH. USING DESPERO'S TELEPATHIC *THIRD EYE*, I'M SCANNING THE ENTIRE CITY.

WELL, AT LEAST THE TRACKING DEVICES BUILT INTO THESE *NEW COSTUMES* ARE WORKING. WE'RE ABOUT TWELVE SECONDS AWAY FROM GYPSY'S SIGNAL.

I AM NOT, HOWEVER, SENSING GYPSY HERSELF. THIS MAY BE A *TRAP*, TRIUMPH.

I KNOW. BUT IT'S NOT LIKE WE HAVE MUCH *CHOICE*--

--GYPSY GOT *SNATCHED* A FEW MINUTES AGO... WHILE SHE WAS ON THE PHONE WITH ME.

I SENT HER HERE TO PARIS TO INTERCEPT J'ONN IN HIS "*BARON VON MAULER*" GUISE. SHE WAS POSING AS RAY'S FIANCÉE--*

*LAST ISH --ROB

MIGHT I ASK--

--*WHY* SUCH AN ELABORATE INVESTIGATION?

IT WAS A *JOKE*, MAINLY. I MEAN, WE COULD'VE ALL HID BEHIND "*VON MAULER'S*" SOFA AND YELLED *SURPRISE!* WHEN J'ONN CAME HOME--

--BUT I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE FUN TO SEE HOW FAR J'ONN WOULD GO BEFORE ADMITTING WE "*GOT*" HIM. I KNEW "*VON MAULER*" WAS PLANNING TO COME HERE TO PARIS--

--I JUST WANTED HIM TO FIND US HERE *WAITING*.

VON MAULER'S ACTIONS ARE INCONSISTENT WITH THE MARTIAN MANHUNTER'S ESTABLISHED PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR.

IT SEEMS UNLIKELY J'ONN WOULD CONTINUE PRETENDING TO BE "*VON MAULER*" ONCE HE BECAME AWARE THE TASK FORCE HAD PENETRATED HIS DISGUISE.

YOU MAY BE RIGHT. I HOPE NOT. I HOPE THIS IS ONLY J'ONN TEACHING US A *LESSON*--

--AND NOT SOME HUGE *SCREW-UP*. GOT TO KILL THE *ZERO GRAV FIELD* I PLACED AROUND YOU, L-RON--

--AND GO *TO WORK!*

HOWDY, Y'ALL. NAME'S *BILLY MAC*. I'M WITH THE *JUSTICE LEAGUE TASK FORCE*.

NOW THIS WON'T HURT A BIT. I'M JUST CERTAIN A LIL' OLD *ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELD* TRIPLING THE G-FORCE IN THIS ROOM--

--WHILE *PRESSURIZING* THE FIELD TO SEVERAL ATMOSPHERES.

IN OTHER WORDS, *NOBODY MOVE*.

BECAUSE, WELL, NOBODY *CAN* MOVE.

SHOW-OFF.

DESPERO'S FORM CAN SURVIVE IN A *VACUUM*, BILLY MAC. YOUR IMPROVISED *STASIS FIELD* IS OF NOMINAL CONCERN.

I AM STILL NOT SCANNING GYPSY.

MONITOR THESE FOLK'S *VITAL SIGNS*, L-RON. LET ME KNOW IF THE PRESSURE'S CAUSING ANY PROBLEMS.

GYPSY'S SIGNAL DEVICE IS COMING FROM DOWN THAT HALL. Oh, AND L-RON--

--*NEVER* CALL ME "*BILLY MAC*."

THOUGHT I'D *BURIED* THAT NAME... LEFT IT WITH *JIMMY*...

GOT TO BE *CAREFUL*...

"...LEST *PAST* SINS COME BACK TO *HAUNT* US."

THAT MAN HAS VERY HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE. TRIUMPH'S FIELD IS GREATLY AGGRAVATING HIS CONDITION.

GOOD...

DEATH TO ALL WEAKLINGS...

WELL... LOOKS LIKE GYPSY GAVE *SOMEBODY* HELL.

L-RON'S RIGHT--I DON'T SEE *HER* --

--BUT I SEE *SOMEBODY* WITH SOME *EXPLAINING* TO DO.

HEY THERE, JETHRO--

--NICE *BELT*. WANNA TALK ABOUT IT?

--WHA--? HOW--?

I CARVED OUT A "*POCKET*" OF NORMAL GRAVITY AND ATMOSPHERE JUST FOR YOU.

TELL ME WHAT I WANT TO KNOW, AND MAYBE I WON'T RIP YOUR FRIGGIN' *LUNGS* OUT.

DIE...

...WEAKLING... DIE...

...NO... I MEAN...

--AN THAT'S IT-- I SWEAR!! THE LI'L GIRL JUST PICKED ME OUT ON THE STREET--CALLED ME "JOHN"--

--WHAT WAS I S'POSED TO THINK?! WHAT WOULD YOU THINK?!

BETTER NOT BE LYING TO ME, BENNY, OR--

TRIUMPH!

A MAN IS DYING!

RELEASE YOUR STASIS FIELD AT ONCE!

HENRY-- HENRY, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT--?

Y-YEAH-- JUST FOR A *SECOND*, I FELT--

--NAH. MUCH BETTER NOW--

--WHAT-- THE BLAZES HAPPENED TO THE *DOOR*?!

ALIENS!!!

MOM

RIGHT HERE IN PARIS!! I *SEEN* 'EM!

RUN FOR YOUR *LIVES*!!

WELL, *THAT* GOT US NOTHING. STILL NO SIGN OF GYPSY ?

I'M SCANNING, TRIUMPH. NOTHING.

COULD VON MAULER HAVE TAKEN HER *OUT OF* TOWN--?

POSSIBLY, OF COURSE--

--GYPSY COULD BE *DEAD*.

THAT WOULD EXPLAIN--

MMMOOOOOO

WHAAAAAM!!

I'LL ASSUME IT WAS SOMETHING I SAID.

SHE'S NOT DEAD.

I DIDN'T KILL HER.

BUT I DID NOT SAY--

YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO. I'M PULLING THE PLUG ON THIS CAPER. CALLING IN--

"--RAY."

WHAT'S THAT NOISE?

BLEEP! BLEEP! BLEEP! BLEEP!

IS THERE A PROBLEM?

NOT SURE. GYPSY'S SIGNAL DEVICE *SEEMS* TO BE WORKING.

WHY ISN'T RAY RESPONDING--?

GEEZ.

WHAT IS THAT *NOISE*?!

BLEEP! BLEEP! BLEEP! BLEEP!

DON'T SAY IT, ALL RIGHT?!

DON'T SAY "*MAYBE RAY'S DEAD, TOO. MAYBE VON MAULER GOT HIM.*"

THAT I DON'T NEED.

THERE'S A LOGICAL EXPLANATION AS TO WHY RAY'S NOT RESPONDING...

BLEEP! BLEEP! BLEEP! BLEEP!

MAN... LIKE CHINESE WATER TORTURE...

...WHERE IS THAT BLEEPING...?

...IT SOUNDS LIKE IT'S COMING FROM *ME!* BUT--

--WAIT, THE *NEW UNIFORM* J'ONN GAVE ME-- I'M WEARING IT UNDER MY STREET CLOTHES!

WHEN I POWERED UP, I INSTINCTIVELY CREATED MY *USUAL* GETUP OUT OF SOLID LIGHT!

GUESS THE NEW THREADS HAVE SOME KIND OF *COMMUNICATOR--*

THAT'S IT.

I'D BETTER PUT OUT A GENERAL *JUSTICE LEAGUE* ALERT--

Uh-- Uhmm-- HELLO --?

RAY?! I'VE BEEN CALLING AND CALLING!

TRIUMPH-- THAT YOU?

HEY, TRIUMPH--I DON'T THINK THAT CHOKULA GUY IS J'ONN.

NEVER MIND THAT. JUST GET HERE RIGHT AWAY.

HERE? I *AM* HERE! I'VE BEEN LOOKING ALL *OVER* FOR YOU GUYS!

I'VE SEARCHED THIS TOWN FROM TOP TO BOTTOM!

IMPOSSIBLE. YOU COULDN'T MISS US.

I'M *TELLING* YOU, MAGNET-BREATH, I'VE BEEN HERE FOR *HOURS.*

WHERE YOU *TOLD* ME YOU'D BE--

HERE WHERE?

--PARIS.

MMOOOOOOOOOOOO--!

KENTUCKY? PARIS KENTUCKY?!

GOOD THING YOU CAN FLY AT THE SPEED OF LIGHT. ACTUALLY, NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT--

--THAT'S ABOUT THE ONLY GOOD THING ABOUT YOU!

HEY-- BITE ME, PALE-FACE.

PARIS KENTUCKY

CITY HALL

AND THOSE THREADS--RAY... YOU LOOK STUPID.

Oh, YEAH, AND YOU'RE "Mr. FASHION."

RAY...YOU CAN SHOW YOUR FACE. IT'S NOT LIKE I'M GOING TO CALL THE ENQUIRER OR SOMETHING.

YOU'RE THE ONLY GUY IN THE CLUB WANDERING AROUND WITH A *MASK*. MASKS ARE *STUPID*.

TRIUMPH--WE'VE BEEN OVER THIS. LOOK, LET'S JUST SAY I'VE BEEN IN THE *PUBLIC EYE* NEARLY EVERY DAY OF MY *LIFE*.

I'M KINDA *INTO* MY PRIVACY RIGHT NOW. SUE ME.

BESIDES, SHOULDN'T WE BE CONCENTRATING ON FINDING *GYPSY*--?

--SEEING HOW IT WAS YOUR *BONEHEAD* PLAN THAT GOT HER *SNATCHED*?

THANK YOU. THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

I'M HOPING SOMETHING ABOUT THE *LAND LOTS* VON MAULER BOUGHT HERE IN PARIS WOULD GIVE US A *CLUE*--

--IN THE BACK OF MY MIND, I GUESS I'M HOPING VON MAULER *IS* J'ONN AFTER ALL--AND HE'S JUST TEACHING US A *LESSON*--

--THAT *GYPSY'S* OKAY--

HEY-- *HEY!!* THAT'S *HIM!!*

BARON ÜMAN VON MAULER (1722-1797)

THAT'S WHO?

HIM-- VON MAULER--THAT *COUNT CHOKULA* GUY AS A *YOUNG* MAN!

I *GOT* IT! I *KNOW* WHAT HE *IS*--!!

WHAT--?

HURRY-- IT'S GETTING *DARK!!*

DUSK...

TOWN RECORDS SAY VON MAULER WAS AN ARCHITECT. HE WORKED ON THE TOWN PLANNING COMMISSION.

HIS *WIFE* WAS ACCIDENTALLY KILLED WHEN A *STORM* CAUSED THE ROOF OF THEIR HOME TO COLLAPSE. VON MAULER BLAMED HIMSELF.

Oooh, *SCARY*. NOW WHAT?

DUNCAN TAVERN

VON MAULER

GRIEF-STRICKEN, HE COMMITTED SUICIDE. HE'S BURIED HERE, NEAR THE DUNCAN TAVERN MEMORIAL.

NOW WE DIG HIM UP.

WE DIG WHO UP?

VON MAULER

HIM! CHOK!

RAY-- CHOK IS DUST.

WELL, IF HE *IS*, THEN WE KNOW HE DIDN'T SNATCH GYPSY.

RAY-- ARE YOU SAYING VON MAULER IS A V--?

HELLO! McFLY! ANYBODY HOME ?!?

I'M *SAYING*, DOOF, MAYBE THIS VON MAULER GUY IS SOME KINDA WACKO, OBSESSED WITH AN ANCIENT RELATIVE.

I'M *SAYING*, ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE.

WAP WAP WAP

I'M *SAYING*-- AND, GOD, I DON'T EVEN LIKE *THINKING* IT--

--THAT COULD BE *GYPSY* DOWN THERE.

I'LL GO.

NEVER THOUGHT OF THAT.

I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR THE *ESOTERIC.* FOR THE *FANTASTIC.*

WHEN, ALL ALONG, IT COULD HAVE BEEN A PLAIN OLD *PSYCHO* KILLER.

GOD... THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A *GAG...*

...AND I SUPPOSE, *MY* WAY OF *ONE-UPPING* THE MARTIAN MANHUNTER--

--GETTING HIM BACK FOR *SNAPPING ORDERS* AT ME LIKE I WAS SOME KIND OF *FOOL.*

I AM A FOOL.

TRAPPED *OUTSIDE* REALITY FOR NEARLY A DECADE--TRYING TO OVERCOMPENSATE --JEALOUS OF ALL THE HEROES WHO STARTED *WITH* ME WHO HAVE GONE WELL *BEYOND* ME.

MAROONED ON J'ONN'S ROOKIE TEAM.

GOTTA FIX THAT ATTITUDE.

BEING A DECADE OUT OF STEP IS NOBODY'S FAULT BUT MY *OWN.* MY STUPID HANG-UPS COULD COST *LIVES.*

IT MAY HAVE COST *ONE* ALREADY--

CHOK ?

CHOK.

CHOK.

WELL, RAY, THERE BLOWS *THAT* THEORY--

--THANK GOD.

YEAH. GUESS WE'RE BACK TO SQUARE ONE--

--NO GYPSY AND NO CLUE.

AND, HEY, I JUST DUG UP A DEAD GUY.

COOL.

THINK, RAY. WE'VE GOTTA WALK THROUGH THIS.

VON MAULER-- AT LEAST *OUR* VON MAULER-- IS A *LAWYER*-- SPECIALIZES IN *ADOPTION SERVICES*--

--HE BOUGHT LAND HERE FOR AN *ORPHANAGE*--LOCKED *YOU* IN AN *AIRLESS ROOM*--

--er, L-RON --?

~L-RON --?!?

ZZZMMMM!

TOO LATE, ROBOT--

SSKZZZOOOW!

--FAR TOO LATE!

I NEVER THOUGHT YOU WOULD DIG UP MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER'S GRAVE.

I'M *IMPRESSED.*

PERHAPS YOU *ARE* WORTHY ADVERSARIES AFTER ALL.

VON MA

NO... NO...

...LOCKED UP BACK THERE. THAT... *THING...*

...I MEAN... I NEVER *REALLY* THOUGHT HE WAS ...HE COULD POSSIBLY BE...

...POOR WILL-- TOOK IT RIGHT IN THE *FACE!* AND HE'S ONLY *INVULNERABLE* WHEN HE *THINKS* ABOUT IT!!

IS HE...? DID HE...?

Er... ummm... RAY...?

DON'T ASK *ME.*

HEY-- THIS WAS *YOUR* THEORY!

YEAH, BUT I'M KINDA BUSY BEING *FREAKED OUT* RIGHT ABOUT NOW--

SKKKZOOOW!

TRIUMPH!!

"...NO! HE'S STILL WITH US!!"

NICE SHOT, VON MAULER--

--HERE'S *MINE!!*

FRRZZZZZZ

Eh? SLICING AROSS MAGNETIC LINES, TRIUMPH?

TRYING TO BOX ME INTO A GRAVITY POCKET?

THAT WON'T STOP ME, "HERO"--

--NOTHING WILL!!

SSSSKKKKZZZZOOOOWWWW!!

MY FORCE FIELD--NOW THAT I'VE GOT IT UP-- TAKING A POUNDING--!

FADING FAST-- THE PAIN-- INCREDIBLE!

C'MON, RAY--

"--DO SOME OF THAT HERO STUFF!!

HEY, COUNT CHOKULA--!

--EAT THIS!!

IT'S MAGICALLY DELICIOUS!!

SSZZA-

ZAK!

SSZZAAOKK!

YEEAARGH!

YEAH, WILL--

--WE NAILED THAT SUCKER!!

NOW ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS FIND...

...uh... FIND...

...oh, CRUD...

NOT OVER YET, "HEROES." BUT SOON.

FRZZZZZ!!

--WHA--?

ROTTED... CORPSES...

...DRAGGING ME DOWN...

UUGHHMNN!!

LET TRIUMPH GO, OR I SWEAR--

I'LL KILL YOU.

LET HIM GO!!

SSKK

OOW!

IDIOT.

I'M ALREADY DEAD.--

--AND NOW, SO ARE YOU!!

RAY!!

Oh...GOD...

...I'VE KILLED HIM... JUST LIKE *GYPSY*...

...I'VE *KILLED* THEM *ALL*...!

FINALLY.

I TRUST THIS WILL TEACH YOU *NEVER* TO MEDDLE IN AFFAIRS WHICH DO NOT *CONCERN* YOU--

--MMPPHHFF--?!?

SKREEE!

ALL RIGHT, VON MAULER--I SHALL ASK YOU ONLY *ONCE*--

SLAM!

--RELEASE MY TEAMMATES--

--OR *DIE.*

Oh--I SEE--YOU'VE *MIND-MELDED* WITH ME... DRAWN ME INTO A *VIRTUAL REALITY* REPRESENTATION OF YOUR *CONTROL CENTER.*

YOU DON'T SCARE ME, ROBOT.

SURE I DO.

YYEEEAARRGH!

BLAAAAPP!

YOU--YOU--*DARE*--?!

--OR DESPERO.

BLAP!

YOU *KNOW* I DO. IN FACT, YOU KNOW SOMETHING MY OWN *TEAMMATES* DO NOT--

--THE FACT THAT THIS MONSTER'S *INSTINCT* HAS BEGUN ASSERTING ITSELF OVER MY *INTELLECT.* THE *TRUTH,* BARON, IS YOU'VE *NO IDEA* IF YOU'RE DEALING WITH *L-RON*--

BLAAAAPP!

YYEEAARGH!!

AND DESPERO WOULD *KILL* YOU WITHOUT A *SECOND THOUGHT.*

THE TIME, VON MAULER, IS *NOW.*

DECIDE.

CHOK ?

CHOK.

I BELIEVE WE'VE BEEN *HALLUCI-NATING.*

Oh MAN... YOU MEAN... THAT FIGHT...

...WHERE CHOK *PASTED* US...

A SOPHIS-TICATED *ILLUSION.* VON MAULER IS A MUTANT. AN *EMPATH.* PERHAPS THE *MOST POWER-FUL* I'VE ENCOUNTERED ON THIS WORLD.

SO...ALL THAT STUFF BACK IN MONTCLAIR...

THE TELEPATHIC SHIELDING I EMPLOYED TO DETER THE MARTIAN MANHUNTER WAS INSUF-FICIENT TO BLOCK VON MAULER'S POWERS.

HE SEEMED *WELL-PREPARED* TO BATTLE THE LEAGUE.

HE HAD, IN FACT, BEEN *EXPECTING* IT--

--WHICH WAS WHY I HAD VON MAULER UNDER *SURVEILLANCE.*

MARTIAN MANHUNTER! J'ONN!

I HAD PLANNED TO DEAL WITH VON MAULER IN MY OWN *TIME.* YOUR UNFORTUNATE *PRANK* FORCED HIS HAND BEFORE I HAD TIME TO PREPARE HER.

PREPARE *WHO--?*

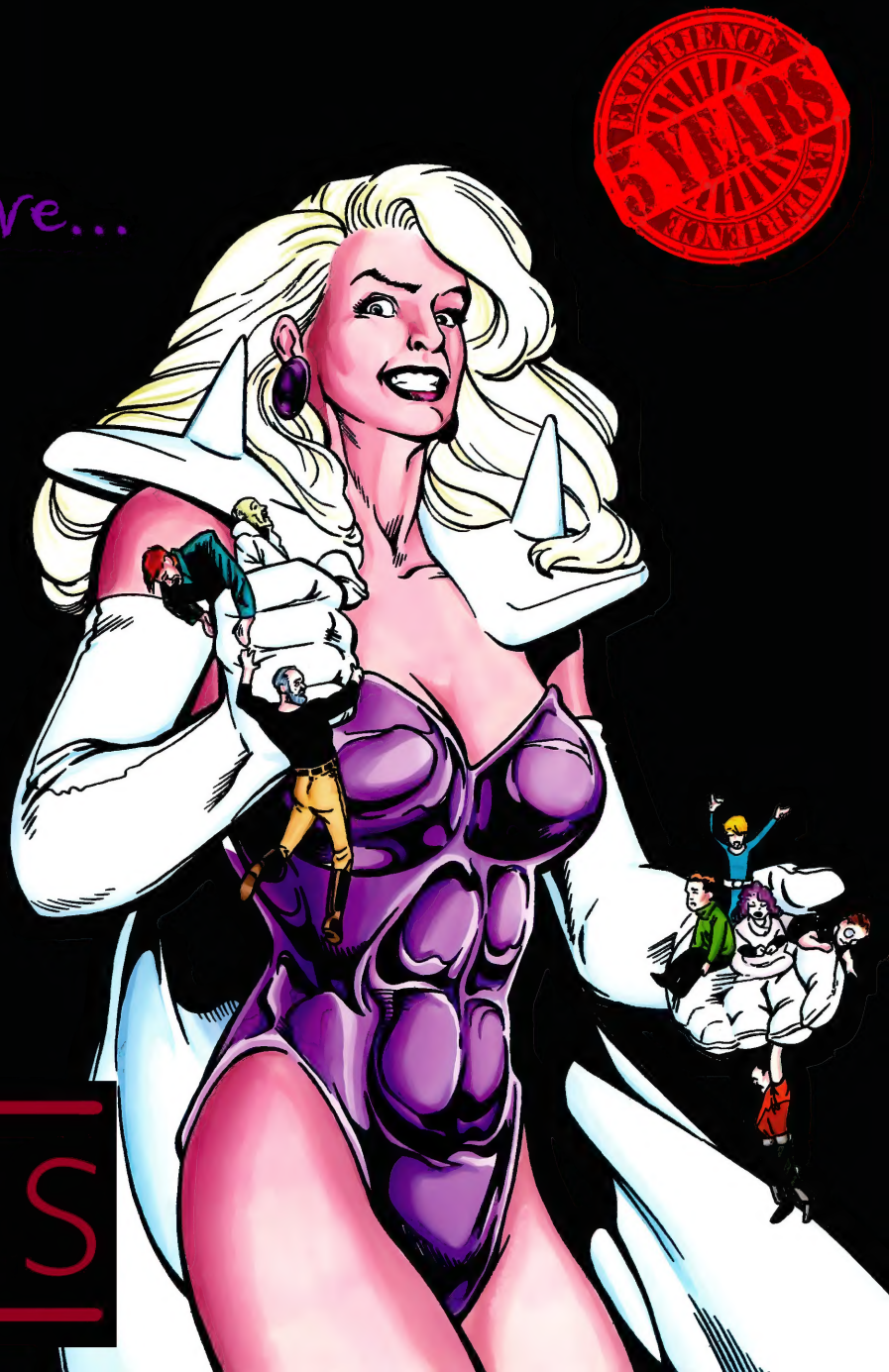
GYPSY.

AND NOW, BECAUSE OF YOUR INTERFERENCE--

--WE MAY HAVE *LOST* HER *FOREVER.*

NEXT: BRIDE OF CHOK --LOVE SUCKS

From Baaldur, with love...



GLORITH

novus